Refuge

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Introduction: Humanizing Studies of Refuge and Displacement?

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Dehumanizing politics and sentiments towards refugees and other migrants are noxious and widespread today. The rise of nativist, right-wing, and anti-asylum populism in Europe and its settler colonial extensions in North America and the Pacific are escalating an existing system of racialized inequality, dispossession, and differential mobility that has grown out of histories of empire and a militarized liberal world order built on racial capitalism. Invocations of animal and natural disaster metaphors thus denigrate life-seeking people on the move as "swarms," "waves," and "floods" (Burrell & Hörschelmann, 2019; Holmes & Castañeda, 2016). Together with xenophobic tropes of "foreign" invasion, these discourses suffuse everyday politics within and beyond the Global North. Some migrants are literally placed in disused zoos or zoo-like spaces, constructing them not only discursively as "animalized subjects" in the colonial present but illustrating their thinly veiled treatment **as** animals (Vaughan-Williams, 2015). Meanwhile, neighbourhoods, nation-states, and communities are imagined in

neo-Malthusian terms to be demographically and culturally under siege by those constructed as "not-quite-human" or simply "non-human" (Mamadouh, 2012; Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 2003). This racialized figure of the non-human is not merely the result of colonial invention but has been produced through a wilful process of "ontological destruction" (Sithole, 2020, p. 63). Born out of white supremacist logics and their colonial infrastructures, the declarative violence of universalizing assumptions of what it means to be "human" continues to reverberate not just in mainstream public discourses on global migration but also, less overtly, within scholarship and research spaces.

As critical scholars of refuge, migration, and displacement, we are cognizant of these racialized geographies of "humanness" and the challenges they pose for us as researchers, educators, and fellow life-seekers. Material injustices, representations, and spatial imaginaries hereby always intersect with the institutional management of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced pop-

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ulations (Mains et al., 2013; Mayblin, 2017; Pasquetti & Sanyal, 2020). These entanglements sensitively shape political possibilities for social justice, inclusion, and liberation, as well as our own intellectual responses and subjectivities. Indeed, the process of researching displacement(s) is mired in unresolved ethical dilemmas. We must interrogate our interactions with diverse groups of border crossers and other people on the move, our proximity to state authorities and aid organizations, as well as our understanding of who a collective "we" includes. Systems of marginalization and dehumanization are not just **external** objects for academic inquiry but are woven into the very ways in which we conceive, plan, conduct, experience, write, and present studies on displacements and (im)mobility. Far from producing disembodied, unlocatable, or even posthuman knowledges, "we consistently speak from a **location** [emphasis added] in the gender, racial, class and sexual hierarchies of the world-system" (Grosfoguel et al., 2015, p. 646).

This forum of **Refuge** offers interventions around the theme Humanizing Studies of Refuge and Displacement? as a theoretical and methodological debate for critical refugee and forced migration scholarship. However, rather than proposing a conclusive path towards humanization—which encompasses complex processes of (re)building, (re)constructing, and (re)thinking "the human," humanity, and social relations—our aim is more modest, tentative, and reflexive. Our starting point was a workshop co-organized by the authors and Patricia Daley at the University of Oxford in November 2018. The workshop brought together an interdisciplinary set of scholars to reflect collectively on dehumanizing tendencies in the ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies underpinning scholarship on refugees

today, and to think through, beyond, and against them.

Taking this event as an entry, we use **humanization** as a heuristic to accommodate multiple contradictory versions of what more emancipatory scholarship might entail. We are not only concerned with tracing, traversing, and pondering over our positionalities and epistemic complicities, or charting "the border between theory and activism" (Lafazani, 2012; Torres, 2018). Instead, we actively seek to practise and advance a radical scholarship that is grounded in political solidarity for social and racial justice. To do so means grappling with, and situating ourselves and our scholarly institutions within, abiding structures of violence and erasure that are—sometimes slowly, sometimes more spectacularly—perpetrating the very ontological destruction of people on the move that we are desperately trying to combat. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1993) famously observed that a "concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as a historical reality" (p. 17). Likewise, for Okechukwu Ibeanu (1990), who examined the causes of racialized displacement within capitalism, resolving forced migration requires radical political change:

> Indeed, until the dominant interests in the world become those that guarantee justice, equity and freedom, not only in legal and political life, but in the totality of human existence, resolving the crisis of refugees and other displaced populations will remain a fleeting illusion.
>
> *p. 60*

It is therefore our aim to advance critical debates in refugee and (forced) migration studies that recentre "the human" and wider human experiences beyond the individualizing tropes of neoliberal subjectivity that too often conceive of the migrant, the refugee,

or the asylum seeker as a stand-in for the supposedly redeeming qualities of Western capitalist modernity. Formulating the title of this forum as a question allows us to express the inherent fragility, uncertainty, and polysemy of this ambition while gesturing towards the unanswered queries arising from it. How do migrants fit within racialized structures of oppression and historically produced hierarchies of humanity? How may the act of writing on and about refugees and migrants inscribe or deny worth? How do "the human," humanism, humanitarianism, and posthumanism intersect? What role can activist scholarship play in humanizing struggles? What is our relationship to human-centred projects of humanitarianism? How do we begin to recover, reconstruct, or make sense of the human in contexts of displacement? And, finally, is humanizing at all viable or desirable, or do we need to fundamentally rethink what research can achieve?

Although this forum cannot and perhaps should not offer authoritative answers to these questions, we hope it can provide a space for generative conversations.

DEHUMANIZATION: MIGRATION AND RACIALIZED HIERARCHIES OF HUMANITY

Delivering the keynote for the workshop from which this forum emerged, Behrouz Boochani, himself in a prison camp on Manus Island at the time, vividly described the intimate and daily denigrations of the identities, physical health, and psychological states of people imprisoned in camps in Papua New Guinea and the Republic of Nauru for seeking refuge in Australia (Boochani, 2018a). "The aim," he stated, "is to torture people to the point where the person gives up" (14:05). The psychological burden of this oppressive system "causes a great deal of agony in the soul and mind of every human being" (17:20), humiliating those seeking refuge in "fundamentally and intimately inhuman ways" (9:37). This system, he theorizes, "is colonialism" (01:40). For Boochani (2018a) , it "is established on colonial-concept thinking and practices" and the hierarchical valuation of humans in Kyriarchal systems of domination and exclusion (01:30; see also Boochani, 2018).

Such connections between colonial logic, dehumanization, and exclusion are not new. Frantz Fanon highlighted the "colonial vocabulary" and logic that "dehumanizes the colonized subject," including still strikingly familiar statements that "hordes will soon invade our shores" (2004, pp. 7–8). For Fanon, dehumanization is justifying the spatial, racialized division of the colonial world and the violence maintaining it. It continues to produce—and be reproduced through—the violence directed towards those forced to seek refuge in a world whose topographies are still shaped by empire. Yet, despite unrelentingly dehumanizing systems of domination, migrants (like the colonized) know they **are** human. Throughout Boochani's writing, he refers to those with whom he is imprisoned as humans, human beings—resisting dehumanization in this reiterative vocabulary (Boochani, 2018b). Fanon emphasizes that this defiant recognition of one's own humanity is in fact the kernel of resistance: an emancipatory humanization (2004, p. 8).

The racist colonial and imperial geographies underlying displacement and responses to it are meanwhile often erased in studies on contemporary humanitarian governance and migration management (Brankamp, 2019; Daley, 2007; Danewid, 2017; Davies and Isakjee, 2018; Pasquetti & Sanyal, 2020). Following Kyriakides et al. (2019, pp. 4–5), "'race[,]' [which] had the effect of dehumanizing and objectifying

people as less deserving of treatment as the human bearers of civilization," is not a mere "variable" in refugee research but forms "part of an embedded structure of oppression in which the racialized refugee regime is generated and reproduced" (Daley, 2007). In this way, the assumed humanism of human(itarian)ism is undermined by its enduring colonial infrastructures. As Tendayi Sithole boldly proclaims, "there cannot be humanism in the colonial condition. This condition is nothing but dehumanization" (2020, p. 75). The same may ring true of institutionalized humanitarianism and possibly even academic aims to "humanize" refugee research, no matter how well intended.

THE TROUBLE WITH "REFUGEE RESEARCH"

Migration and mobilities have become key themes in the social sciences in recent decades, including a subfield of research on asylum seekers and refugees, generating interdisciplinary resonance across disciplines such as geography, anthropology, sociology, political science, history, and law. The latest surge in studies interested in people on the move has arguably been a corollary of Europe's "long summer of migration" (Kasparek & Speer, 2015), even though forced displacement has affected millions of people in formerly colonized societies of the Global South for decades prior. From the inception of this field of study, scholars have often assumed dual roles as academics **and** advocates, writers **and** activists, who critically reflected on and analyzed the institutional imposition of aid (Harrell-Bond, 1986), the role of capitalism, class struggle and white supremacy (Ibeanu, 1990), imbalances in knowledge production on refugees (Chimni, 1998), denials of agency and voice to displaced people (Malkki, 1995), and the global

politics of containment (Hyndman, 2000).

While critical refugee scholarship has never subsided, it has gradually been eclipsed by politically more expedient strands of research aligned with powerful actors on a global stage. Today, some of the most publicly acknowledged (and celebrated) refugee research advocates liberal economic empowerment, entrepreneurialism, and market-based solutions to conditions of displacement, social exclusion, and precarious citizenship. Refugee agency, self-reliance, resilience, and self-determination are thereby framed as countering the more immediately harmful representations of refugees as helpless "victims," security threats, or dependent subjects of aid. Nevertheless, this once again constructs a narrow version of the "ideal refugee" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014), which masks the perennial spatial and political exclusion of refugees from host societies, citizenship regimes, and substantial rights through a deceptive process of "liberal violence" (Isakjee et al., 2020).

Further, the market orientation of refugee policy comes at a time when humanitarian organizations—above all, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)—are forging closer partnerships with international financial institutions such as the World Bank, private businesses, foundations, and corporate investors as institutionalized in the global compacts on refugees and for migration (UN, 2018a, 2018b), as well as the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) (UN, 2018c). The legitimacy of these questionable relationships seems unaffected by the continuing erosion of refugee rights in many host states and the planetary immobilization aims that often underlie the promotion of "self-reliance" policies (Hyndman & Reynolds, 2020). On the contrary, we argue that the seemingly depoliticized, technocratic logics engrained in "migration man-

agement," aid discourses that responsibilize individuals, empowerment rhetoric, and decreases in public funding continue to play into the dehumanization of displaced communities globally while failing to confront its systemic underpinnings in capitalism, imperialism, coloniality, racism, xenophobia, and denial of citizenship rights.

HUMANIZATION: TOWARDS (RE)CONSTRUCTING "THE HUMAN"

It is now a commonplace observation that disciplinary refugee and forced migration research is deeply implicated in producing—and is structurally privileged by—the unequal geographies of knowledge production between the Global North and the Global South (Chimni, 1998; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Grosfoguel et al., 2015; Kosnick, 2021; Pasquetti & Sanyal, 2020). Processes of dehumanization are therefore not only objects of analysis or inquiry but are imbricated in the epistemologies, methodologies, and subject positions that underpin our collective intellectual endeavours. This forces us to seriously reckon with our own fragmented **humanness**, including the differential positions we inhabit within intersecting global orders of race, class, gender, ability, and geographical location. Thus, universalizing conceptions of "humanity" and "Man" are, as Walter Mignolo rightfully argues, merely "a narrativization that has been produced with the very instruments (or categories) that we study **with**" (2015, p. 107). Far from a natural ontological category, humanity itself is a product of the same socio-historical forces that entrench unequal geographies of knowledge production. Attempts towards humanization have therefore emerged against the background of coloniality and a global racial order in which a Black and Brown majority

has been excluded from humanity and relegated to what Fanon termed a "zone of non-being" (2008, p. 2). Humanization then risks, at worst, reproducing this "epistemic totality" that is hidden behind a false egalitarian notion of communion (Mignolo (2015), 2015, p. 109). As a result, we consciously do not propose a singular path towards achieving humanization, not least as such a prescription is bound to fail while inevitably creating new exclusions, hierarchies, and closures.

We draw inspiration from scholars in post-colonial, decolonial, and Black studies who fight against the dehumanization brought about by colonization, slavery, racial capitalism, and ongoing dispossession to frame our struggles towards (re)assembling, (re)thinking, and (re)making **the human** in all of its diversity (Gilroy, 2016; Mckittrick, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Sithole, 2020; Weheliye, 2014; Wynter, 2003). Any ambition of humanization must therefore come with a caution: it is necessarily a partial and unfinished project—a series of openings rather than a definitive closure. Sylvia Wynter has worked against universalized narrativizations of the figure of "Man" as the stand-in for the totality of human lives and their experiences. Critiquing the imperial figure of Man-as-human, created during the European Enlightenment, Wynter's work aspires to recover and hereby better understand "the grounds of human being" (Wynter & Scott, 2000). In a sense, this follows Césaire (1972) noted aphorism postulating his ambition to forge a reformed "humanism made to the measure of the world" (p. 73). Césaire and Wynter are not advancing a posthumanist project but instead a generative antihumanism that builds, recovers, heals, and rewrites, rather than seeking to superficially overcome, "the human" (Zimitri, 2020).

Articulating a different reconstructive work, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) draws on Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's (2009) notion of "re-membering" as an embodied decolonial act to undo the colonial violence of dispersal and erasure of knowledge in human life. For Ngũgĩ, colonial dispossession induced a process of "dismembering"—at once territorial, communal, epistemic, and corporeal—which necessitates a restorative counter-initiative and a "quest for wholeness" (wa Thiong'o, 2009). Against Europe's imperial project of a "false" humanism, Gobodo-Madikizela (2002) proposes what she calls an alternative "reparative humanism" for the eventual restoration of injured, alienated humanity in the wake of colonial trauma (Gilroy, 2016, p. 112). Gobodo-Madikizela's (2002) reparative form of humanism is premised on a dual process of colonial survivors counteracting the indignity of racism and domination by issuing (conditional) forgiveness and empathy, while perpetrators of colonial violence may also (re)acquire their own humanity by acts of truth-telling or demonstrating remorse. Sithole (2020) envisions a less conciliary future of social justice in which the ontological destruction of the colonized subject is systematically undone by redefining the dehumanizing condition of anti-Blackness through the "Black register": a way of acting and thinking in which Blackness rewrites both the definition of humanness and, with it, the world. In essence, it is "the ethical operation of blackness liberating itself in its own name" (p. 6).

HUMANIZING POSSIBILITIES IN STUDIES ON DISPLACEMENT

What can studies on refuge and displacement learn from these multiple, incomplete, and diverging avenues for humanization

and the remaking of human(e) relations? Despite its colonial disciplinarity, and the overt inequalities of the academic-industrial complex, research on forced migration is not inevitably aligned with institutionalized power. Indeed, a prominent activist tradition exists in refugee scholarship—not least personified by the late Barbara Harrell-Bond—which always defended the rights of displaced people against the violence of states or aid organizations. Politically engaged scholars have expended considerable energy to challenge dehumanizing research practices, policies, and language (Conlon & Gill, 2015; Daley, 021a; Hyndman & Mountz, 2007; Oliver et al., 2019). Therefore, we use the term **humanizing** not uncritically but as a shorthand for the diverse, radical challenges to all sources of dehumanizing politics and scholarship. Working in exceptional spaces and encounters laden with asymmetrical power relations, we are especially attentive to ethical and methodological concerns (Maillet et al., 2017; Smith, 2015; Parvati, 2016). We both draw upon and contribute to the already rich contemplation of ethics and methods in complex research contexts of bordering, "crisis," care, and control by recentring the principle aims of an emancipatory humanization (Fanon, 2004; Gomes, 2017; Mckittrick, 2015).

Crucially, refugees, migrants, and displaced communities have been active protestors and organizers themselves (Bhimji, 2016; Lecadet, 2016; Rygiel, 2011). Increasingly, refugees and forced migrants also feature prominently as writers, poets, artists, scholars, and knowledge producers whose experiences of displacement shed critical light on the hegemonic forms of studying asylum, borders, and mobilities (Boochani, 2018b; Khosravi, 2010; Qasmiyeh, 2021). Radical refugee scholars have sometimes

built networks of collective knowledge production or sharing, a prime example of which is Critical Refugee Studies.[1] Mirroring Wynter's generative anti-humanism, these key interventions have advocated for imbuing the received category of "the refugee" with "social and political critiques that critically call into question the relationship between war, race, and violence, then and now" (Espiritu, 2006, p. 411).

Forced migration is a troubled political terrain on which the nature of human social relations, actions, and sociality is perpetually questioned. We understand the conditions of exile and displacement as "an existential, phenomenological, ethical, and ultimately, human experience" (Oliver et al., 2019, p. 1) that requires permanent critical theorizing. Whether these seemingly divergent struggles (outlined above) towards unsettling and reimagining of "the human" will eventually herald what Daley calls "a planetary humanity consensus" (2021b, p. 366)—which can tackle the impending political, socio-economic, and ecological disasters—remains to be seen. As much as this forum seeks to energize an open-ended agenda of humanizing research on forced migration, it simultaneously questions the possibility and desirability of doing so. Asking what **humanizing** may mean is not a teleological task but requires an ongoing conversation about subjectivities, representations, resources, and collective research futures that we wish to advance.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributors to this forum variously examine the un/desirability and im/possibility of "humanizing" studies of refuge and displacement. All of the interventions that follow address underlying epistemological and methodological approaches in refugee studies as central to addressing dehumanization in research.

As **Patricia Daley** argues in the opening piece, the framing of ethics in forced migration studies has been overly reductive. The precept of **do no harm** should extend beyond mitigating immediate risks to participants and apply also to the design, questions, and philosophical underpinnings of research as these may contribute to the (re)production of violence, not least towards racialized and marginalized people. The two subsequent interventions each critique one such framework. **Yolanda Weima** addresses supposedly pro-asylum narratives about refugees as "resources" for host states. Instead of humanizing refugees, the language of resources reinforces a human/non-human distinction that defines commodities and their value within global capitalism, thus objectifying displaced populations. An even more ubiquitous theoretical point of departure in Western mainstream refugee studies is Giorgio Agamben's figure of "bare life." **Hashem Abushama** critiques Agamben using the work of Black theorist Alexander Weheliye. Thinking from the space of the Palestinian refugee camp, he finds Weheliye's emphasis on "the flesh" a more incisive terrain on which the global racial order of modernity is imprinted and from which it can be challenged and unthought.

Two further interventions examine the intertwining of methodology and practicalities of "doing" and designing research. **Estella Carpi** argues that attempts at humanization are conditional on our willingness as scholars to be self-critical of problematic interactions with "the field." This requires a proactive stance against "research hot spots,"

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[1] 1 See the Critical Refugee Studies Collective website: http://www.criticalrefugeestudies.com/.

which put needless pressure on the communities in question and risks circularity of knowledge. A relational view of the experiences of citizens and non-citizens fends against compartmentalized refugee research framings. **Hanno Brankamp** draws attention to how research can also be unduly shaped through attempts to "bridge" gaps between academic scholarship and the world of humanitarian policy-makers and practitioners. He argues that it is necessary to demarcate research committed to anti-violence and social justice against the "humanitarian embrace" of institutionalized aid. Resonating with Carpi's call for reflexivity and relationality, he proposes slow, insurgent, and politically engaged research methodologies, emphasizing solidarity with encamped and displaced migrants.

The final two contributions cast a critical light on our own attempts at humanization. **Jonathan Darling** questions whether, in aiming to "humanize" migrants, refugee studies can ultimately resist reproducing normative accounts of "the human." Indeed, folding different life experiences and positionalities into any singularity risks eclipsing alternative ways in which "the human" has been historically, politically, and racially constructed. Finally, **Oliver Bakewell** contends that social scientific research is in itself a dehumanizing project because it reduces variegated human experiences to labels, categories, and analytical models. In contrast to the other contributors, Bakewell hereby asks whether a more realistic ambition towards effecting positive change for the lives of displaced populations would be to "dehumanize differently" by recognizing the inevitable shortcomings and dehumanizing tendencies of social research.

Collectively, the interventions in this forum urge us to engage reflexively in struggles to undo persistent indignity, marginalization, and violence towards refugees, as well as to people affected by both displacement and involuntary immobilities beyond this category. While the contributors at times disagree on the precise strategies, political alliances, and discourses necessary for this endeavour—including the utility of the language of humanization itself—we are united in our conviction that studies of refuge and displacement must seek to improve the lives of (displaced) migrants. However, this long-held "imperative" of refugee studies (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003) can no longer be simply viewed as a marriage of academic and policy relevance. Radical change can only be sought through political solidarity and protest, as well as substantive critiques of global capitalism, epistemic violence, structural exclusion, and racialized control.

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